



**RCSI**

# Introducing the concept of palliative care – an analysis of student perceptions of the influence and utility of a first year elective

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RCSI DEVELOPING HEALTHCARE LEADERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE WORLDWIDE







# Research (Qualitative):



- Research Aim: To explore the perceived influence and utility of introducing the concept of palliative care at an early stage in an undergraduate curriculum
- Semi-structured interviews (focus group and individual) - targeted students who had just completed the elective and those in later years of the programme
- We decided to use the lens of **threshold concepts** to explore the students' evolving perceptions of the concept of care

# Threshold Concepts

- A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress."

(Meyer and Land, 2003)



- Open University, UK identified 'threshold concepts' as one of 10 new pedagogies with the potential to provoke major shifts in educational practice

(Sharples *et al.*, 2014)

# Previous Research

- Internationally, studies have focused on the learning experience of students encountering hospice-based electives (e.g. Stecho et al 2012) or specific rotations (Wearn et al. 2016)
- Less attention has been focused on the capacity for students in earlier stages of the curriculum to gain some cognisance of the concept of hospice care, and the implications of this for their developing understanding of patient care
- Influenced by Clouder - Caring as a 'threshold concept': Students' conceptualisation of what caring means in different contexts develops .... from initial, potentially quite bounded, understanding of what care entails to developing more a personal framework for caring (Clouder 2005)

# Key themes that have emerged to date .....



## Skills

Leadership;  
Communication;  
Teamwork;  
Negotiation



## Inter-Cultural

*'I actually didn't  
realise that so many  
things were  
unacceptable in  
different cultures so  
that was interesting'*



## Concept of Care





# Evolving Concept of Palliative Care



- ‘It was kind of *enlightening*’
- ‘There’s *still a lot of life to live there*’
- ‘I didn’t really think about how the end of their life needed to be kind of *lived out*’ .. ‘and made as enjoyable and comfortable as possible’
- ‘Yeah sometimes when you’re studying you kind of forget to think about the *human side* of it because you’re just learning it all on paper so it kind of brought it all back down to earth that these are *people’s lives and emotions* you’re dealing with’
- ‘....the *dignity of the patient is kept* .... *I didn’t really think about that kind of thing before*’





# Broader Impact – Concept of Care Itself

## Growing sense that ‘care’ is not just about ‘cure’

- ‘Especially our *role* is so positive, like we’re usually just helping people get back to where they were, so it’s difficult to understand that *you can’t do that for some people*’
- ‘Yeah ... it is really upsetting because you don’t think that when you go into hospital *you think everyone is getting treated* but this has made me realise that you need to come to terms with the fact that *not everyone can be fixed* and that your goal needs to be to make them as comfortable as possible’
- ‘....you’re *not just about treating a disease* .....
- ‘I would have thought that it’s mostly doctors that are dealing with medications and things like that but then you kind of found out that *physios do it all as well* in keeping them comfortable and things like that, so *I didn’t really realise that*’



# Broader Impact – Cultural Differences Related to the Provision of Palliative Care

- *'I mean we don't have this in our country so it was something that really locked in my mind – we should do it'*
- *'Like the idea of it, the benefit of the hospice was something, we should consider it in our country, in Gulf country, so everything about it, it impacts .... the benefits of it. So since it has this much benefits we should do it, I mean this is the most thing that has impacted me from the elective'*

# Broader Impact - Curriculum

- **Anatomy: Linked to Dissection Room –**

*‘instead of thinking of them as just cadavers I was trying to think of ... I don’t know how to word this, like them dying and **them as people** and **their back story** and kind of trying to **add the emotion** into it so I’d show them **ultimate respect**’*

- *‘You know **they had a family, they had a life**’*

# Conclusion

- Work in progress; more analysis to be done
- Emergent evidence of impact of elective on concept of care and concept of "patient"
- Need to investigate how this aligns with/supports concept of care students are encountering at other stages of the curriculum
- Scope to further explore curricular elements in student learning around the whole concept of palliative care – should we be doing more?

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